

“Waiting and Watching”

Introduction: For the next two Sundays we will turn our attention to the launching of the ministry of the church by and through the person and power of the Holy Spirit. Since our celebration of resurrection on Easter Sunday, we have been observing some of the ways the risen Jesus came alongside followers who were filled with grief, disillusionment, despair, and doubt. We saw how Jesus met them where they were and began to gather them together and prepare them to bear witness to him in word and in deed.

Those had to have been heady days! There was talk about a gift, about a baptism, about power, and about a mission that was to extend to the ends of the earth. All of this would take place under the guidance and direction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, for whom they were to wait. And then, Jesus just flat out disappeared, ascending – returning – to the realm of the Father.

Admittedly, the ascension is a rather strange event. It took place 40 days after the resurrection and 10 days prior to Pentecost. Let’s hear how Luke puts it into context and then consider how the truth that Jesus has ascended to the Father’s right hand actually helps us wait, in whatever situation God may be calling us to do that, with confidence. [READ]

I. The Ascension – Why did he go?

A. As we’ve said before, it is best to think of heaven not as some place far, far away that can only be reached by rocket ship! Rather, heaven is simply God’s dimension of invisible reality, as earth is our dimension of visible reality (cf. Ps. 115:16; Col. 1:16; 3:1-2). Distance is never really discussed, just different dimensions. So, when Jesus ascended, he simply entered the dimension of heaven, which is as close to us as the clouds, or even just our breath. But that still leaves the question: Why did Jesus go? Why did he leave his followers, just as they were starting to enjoy his resurrected presence? Well, the ascension leads us to understand a number important realities.

1. The ascension validated Jesus’ ministry; it declared that his mission on earth had been accomplished. At the end of that upper room discourse we’re allowed to eavesdrop on his conversation with the Father: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (Jn. 17:5). As if to punctuate this, on the cross we hear Jesus declare: “It is finished.” And then the writer of Hebrews later sums it up: “After he had provided purification for sins, [Jesus] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb. 1:3). To be seated meant that a task had been completed. The mission on which he’d been sent – to conquer sin and death and reveal the person and love of the Father – was accomplished. Though the implications of this mission are still being worked out, we can be confident that Jesus didn’t somehow miss, or forget to do something.

2. The ascension reveals that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord of all. You might recall during his trial the high priest declaring: “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus answered: “You have said so. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” When he heard this, the high priest pulled a nutty, tearing his clothes, concluding that Jesus had uttered blasphemy and was deserving of death (Ma. 26:63-68). Why? Well, what Jesus did was to identify himself with the OT messianic expectation (see Daniel 7) of the one through whom God would establish his heavenly reign on earth. As far as the high priest was concerned,

one who was born in a manger, hung out with sinners, and was now allowing himself to be crucified, couldn't be *that* one! But, as Paul explained it to the church in Ephesus, the glorious Father "raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...and placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head of everything..." (Eph. 1:20-22). Jesus is definitely *that* one, the ascension assures us. All things, even things that seem out of control, are in his hands.

3. The ascension shows that Jesus, at the right hand of the Father, is not only ruling, but also praying for us. Paul explains the beauty of this: "Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Ro. 8:34). "I know what it's like down there," you can almost hear him explain to the Father! Jesus has our backs.

4. The ascension gives Jesus time to go and prepare a place for us in his new creation, when the dimensions of heaven and earth will be joined together. And in case we're worried about where that might be, and how on earth we might get there, he promises to return and personally show us the way home (Jn. 14:2-3).

Illustration: Now that Rama's mom is more or less settled, we're beginning to turn our attention to the pilgrimage walk we'll be taking at the end of next month – The Cotswold Way. While we have a room at an inn reserved each night along the 100-mile route, getting from Heathrow to the first inn sounds like a bit of a challenge. After flying all night, we'll need to then take two trains, and then a bus, before we finally arrive. Frankly, I just want someone to meet us at the airport and drive us straight there, but it's not gonna' happen! But it will happen that way when Jesus meets us. He'll meet us and take us directly where we need to go, to the place he has reserved for us.

5. The ascension allows for the continuation of Jesus' ministry on earth. As he explains it: "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate (HS) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn. 16:7). Rather than remaining in one place, with one group of people, the ascension paves the way for the ministry of the Spirit, enabling Jesus to reside in each of his followers as we make our way in the world and continue his ministry.

B. Now, the followers of Jesus certainly didn't grasp all of this as they watched him disappear from their sight behind a cloud. The understanding that we have just reviewed would develop as the NT writers, under the guidance of the Spirit, reflected on what they had seen and heard. But at that point they did understand his call for them to wait, to wait for the gift of the Spirit. And what we see is that their waiting was not a time of inactivity, but a time of confident prayer. Luke describes it this way: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Ac. 1:14). It was a time of great expectations!

II. A Time of Expectant Prayer

A. Let's look at two words: together and constantly. Let's start with *constantly*. It doesn't take a lot of googling to discover that there are dozens and dozens and dozens of books that have been written on prayer. Many deal with "technique" and cover such topics as what to pray, when to pray, where to pray, and even what to do when your mind wanders! The only real technique Jesus seems to give us comes in the form of the Lord's Prayer, in which Jesus lays out a helpful outline for our praying. But mostly what we see Jesus do, and then his followers do, is just pray. What we see instead of technique is

simply that he and his followers made time to pray, whatever that looked like. They made time constantly, which at least means not every now and then, but with frequent regularity, for conversation; to talk to God and to listen to God, waiting for his direction and watching for his power.

B. And then the word *together*. A number of us over the past few years have experienced the “empty nest” syndrome as our young adults have headed off to college, and then on to life beyond. You know that while there may be more room to move around in your home, far less laundry to do and far more access to the television and your car, there is also a certain energy that has left your home. Your family just isn’t the same anymore. Praying as an individual is important, but there is also, in some way, a kind of family energy that is present when God’s people gather together to pray. Not only are there more “ears and eyes” with which to listen and watch for God, but we can also listen to one another as we share our hearts in prayer. If God has launched his mission in the world through the church, then the church will need to spend some time together listening for what their part in the launching should be.

Illustration: This is the time of year when ocean-going boat owners spend time sanding and painting the bottom of their boats. If you’ve ever done this, you know it’s a nasty job! I remember doing this one year a while back and even though I had on a hat, glasses, and a mask, my lungs and nostrils still filled with old paint dust. It thus is a job a boat owner is tempted to skip. After all, no one really sees the bottom of your boat; why not just put your boat in the water and sail away? Because if you don’t, your hull will, over time, collect all sorts of junk and you won’t move through the water very well.

Prayer is that kind of work. No one really sees it, and it is tempting to plunge ahead with our plans and projects without it. But if they are not prepared – bathed and coated – with prayer, if we just plunge ahead and don’t seek God’s direction and empowerment, we will not move through the world very well, at least as he desires us to.

There is a time to wait and watch, to seek and to listen, for the direction God would have us go and the power to do what lies beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort. It’s what the followers of Jesus did in those days after the ascension, days in which he told them to wait. And it is what we see them continue to do, even after the arrival of the Spirit (cf. 2:42).

Importantly, the ascension gives us ground for confidence when we pray: confidence that Jesus did on the cross all that needed to be done; confidence that he is Lord of all things; confidence that our future is secure as he is both praying for us and preparing a place for us. So let us be confident that as we wait and watch, regularly, together, that he will provide us the guidance and power that we need to do whatever he is calling us to do.